

Foraging for powerful plants around Salpa Line

A hand sweeps down among the bushes and gathers ripe berries into its palm or scoop, dropping them into a small container. Sometimes, but less common, the flowering tops of a plant may be snipped and placed into a small bag. These small actions of foraging wild plants are often part of an expedition to the Finnish countryside in summer or autumn, leisure and natural tourism of a kind, indeed 'every-person's right' in Finland. But it is unlikely considered to be a cultural-historical or military heritage action. Context, as it has been said, is half of the work¹.

Meilikkälä municipality, presents itself as "The Pearl of South-eastern Finland", an area of almost 441 km square and a population of 2,300. Services, agriculture and forestry, as well as manufacturing, make up the main sources of livelihood for it's people. They are also known for keeping horses, with more than 100 trotting and riding horses in the area. On the upper front cover of the local tourist brochure young horses running loose in a June field after the long winter confinement. It is said that thousands of people come to watch this event. And on the lower half of the brochure, are rough-hewn chunks of granite lined in rows as anti-tank barricades in front of birch trees (see Figure 1). Neighbouring Virolahti municipality also includes images of bunkers and barricades as part of it's image attracting visitors to the area².



Figure 1. Tank obstacles in Meilikkälä (photograph credit: Jniemenmaa, commons.wikimedia.org)

It was the history of the site almost 70 years before which attracted our group to the area. The Salpa Line (*Salpa Linja* in Finnish), within tens of kilometres from the current Russian border, is a 1200km long fortification line were first built by Finland between 1940-41 as self-defence from the Soviet Union between the Winter and Continuation wars. Finland had to prepare itself for a new struggle following its Winter War with the Soviet Union. The Southern part of the line was built first, near Meilikkälä and Virolahti, and was the most fortified area, as this was the most obvious line of land attack from the Karelian Isthmus. Originally built by Swedish volunteers, 900 in number, it was also initiated with 20 million Swedish crown donated by Sweden, almost half of the amount of trade between the countries at the time. Soon, the construction site also provided work for a large number

of civilians, including the women's auxiliary defence organization Lotta Svärd, responsible for catering and other auxiliary duties.

The Continuation War between the same combatants began in late June, 1941. However, the Salpa Line was mostly quiet during this time, as the fronts were further ahead on the Karelian Isthmus., and many of the fortification materials such as stones and barbed wire were stripped and sent to other fronts further ahead. However, Finnish General Mannerheim commissioned an investigation in 1944 into what fortifications of the Salpa Line were left. Changes and renovations were made, and the Salpa Line became the biggest building site in history of independent Finland, when, at its most active in March 1944, both the Finnish army and over 35,000 civilian volunteers were involved in reconstructions, including 2000 Lotta Svärd women volunteers who took care of catering involved. The Continuation War's main battles took place in June 1944, and by the middle of the month it was ordered to get the Salpa Line ready for battle, with all troops were moved back to the Salpa Line. In early September 1944 the Salpa Line was declared the main defence line of the country. On September 19th, Finland signed a peace treaty with Soviet Union. The Salpa Line, as one of the longest defence infrastructures of the World, among a list including the Great Wall of China, it didn't see combat and was never used.



Figure 2. Restored trenches and bunkers near to Salpa Line Centre.

The Salpa Line was classified up until the 1980s. In 1987 the municipality created a museum centre which focuses attention on the social-historical and military history of *Salpa Linja*, its material forms and relevance in Finnish and Nordic history (Figure 2). As noted by a Russian fortress-heritage enthusiast, it is clear Finnish conservationists have done much appreciated heritage access work: “war monuments and museums have been made in many pillboxes along highways and main roads. There are the electricity light in that pillboxes and bunkers, armaments, the trenches, entrenchments and fragments of wire obstacles are restored thoroughly.”³

Considering the previous expeditions that have taken place earlier in the *Abandoned Mystery* project⁴—Pre-WWII fortifications and Soviet military installations in Königsberg/Kaliningrad in Baltic Russia, western Lithuania, and Kurzeme (Courland), Latvia—the *Abandoned Mystery* expedition in Finland was made to an area where WWII fortifications have been closely integrated, indeed embraced, into the regional and touristic identity of the municipality and the natural landscape. As an example of this interweaving of relations to the landscape, the accommodation booked for the expedition, Lokinpesä villa, was found via the Salpa Centre website, and presented itself as an ideal forest-seaside villa for group fishing expeditions, nature trail walks, and foraging for mushrooms or berries⁵. It was also located on Siikasaari peninsula, near to the very southern-most starting-point of Salpa Linja, where the fortifications met the sea coastline.

In preparation for joining the expedition, I reflecting upon my own potential contribution to *Abandoned Mystery* platform. In previous years, I have been involved in co-producing an expedition in collaboration with Signe Pucena (SERDE, Aizpute, Latvia) which focused on local wild plant foraging practices and ethnobotany in Kurzeme⁶, and also attended a bioart residency-workshop in Kilpisjärvi, Finnish Lapland, doing research on a particular arctic berry (Mountain Crowberry)⁷. My willingness to coordinate and organize the *Salpa Linja* camp was based on an interest in exploring other contexts for interdisciplinary expeditions related to cultural heritage, including related knowledge of local plants. As a contribution to the *Abandoned Mystery* project, I decided to continue the herbological focus, and consulted a local reference book *Practical Herbs* by the Helsinki-based herbalist Henriette Kress. One plant entry in particular caught my attention: “Cinquefoils help you defend yourself. They grow you elbows..”, “shield you from external influences” and “bolster you against external pressures.”⁸



Figure 3. *Potentilla argentea*. (Photograph credit: Fornax, 2005. Illustration credit: Johannes Strum, Deutschlands flora in Abbildungen, 1796. commons.wikimedia.org)

Cinquefoils or the *Potentilla* species of plant come in various forms. To give a few examples: *Potentilla anserina* is a ground cover plant with Rowan-like leaves, which have fine silvery undersides, and likely because of this is called Silverweed cinquefoil⁹ in English. This plant is said to thrive in sand or gravel and likes sunny spots. Meanwhile, Hoary cinquefoil¹⁰ (*Potentilla argentea*) is more spindly and upright with three, five or seven fingered leaves, and is more likely found in dry meadows and ditches. Common to both these examples are small yellow flowers with five petals, which blossom from summer to autumn (Figure 3). To assist my familiarity and research, I anyhow downloaded commons-orientated images and illustrations of Cinquefoils from the Internet¹¹. Enthused, I checked University of Helsinki Natural Science Museum's Kasvisatlas ('plant-atlas') website to assess the plant's availability in Finland. Both forms of *Potentilla* could be found in Southern Finland, although it was clear from the latest data that it is most densely found in the south-west, and less commonly found in the south-eastern border, although the *Potentilla argentea* is spread slightly wider.¹² I also presumed that more southern latitudes outside Finland, or warmer climatic periods would increase the chance of finding it. Certainly, I recognized it wasn't going to be easy to find.

The Salpa Linja Museum near Miehikkälä, includes an exhibition, museum cafe and shop, open 10-18 in summer-time, is supplemented by an outdoor museum area hectares wide. The Salpa Centre¹³ is currently being developed as an international centre for fortification museums, nature and tourism. We arranged a guided tour by one of the staff of the different preserved installations on site. To begin, the museum's introduction video was evocative, including archival film footage and interviews with male veterans and locals, who still spoke with emotion remembering the threat of invasion posed by the Soviet Union, and also with pride at achieving vast stretch of defence installations. The mention of volunteer auxiliary support by Lotta Svärd members in the video made me wonder if the Swedish and Finnish women involved also foraged wild plants and berries while based there during the Salpa Line construction and reconstruction period, to supplement diets and make teas to keep people healthy and "bolstered".



Figure 4. Foraging wild plants near Salpa Museum

Outside the museum, we visited several other sites nearby in the forest, gathering many photographs. In addition, many handfuls of the commonly-found European Blueberry¹⁴ (*Vaccinium myrtillus*) and Lingonberry¹⁵ (*Vaccinium vitis-idaea*) were gathered that had tasteful appeal, as well as some recognized health and vitamin values¹⁶. No *Potentilla* species were found among these trenches and bunker installations (due to the lack of sunny clearings in the forest). However, Reina Magica, an enthusiast also for foraging plants among our expedition group, identified late-blossoming St. John's Wort¹⁷ (*Hypericum perforatum*) which we subsequently gathered also (Figure 4). Historically a well-known medicinal wild herb for treating mild to medium depression¹⁸, St. John's Wort is, according to Kress, "good for the nerves, for nervousity, for the mood."¹⁹

The Salpa Trail is a 50km long hiking trail through Virolahti's and Meilikkälä's cultural and natural landscapes, from seaside through rocky heathland and forests, fields and villages²⁰. Blue dots on the map weave approximately around the historical Salpa Linja, while in the landscape, local farmers had also intertwined military moments with their agricultural actions, in some cases piling tank obstacle stones together in fields, and plowing round them (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Gathered stone-piles from Salpa Line in harvested fields.

Although the physical barriers and trenches were at their most fortified in this region, although in contemporary times they appeared like dotted lines in and out of natural and cultivated land. Hence, our second day's expedition met up with several sites on the trail, including several bunkers accessible near the villages of Harju and Ravijoki in Virolahti municipality that are marked on the Salpa Trail. Several were flooded with water, but most have been renovated and given information boards giving context before entering. Audio and video recordings were made of the details, insides and outside views of these sites.

My own activity continued to focus on finding *Potentilla*, although now I was also collecting bunches of St. John's Wort, as well as different berries, while the other men in the group were collecting mushrooms. It was at Harju that I finally found some Hoary cinquefoil, as guided on the

side of a field meadow path (Figure 6), gathering the leaves and flowering tops into a small bag, which were later hung out to dry in bunches in our Lokinpesä cabin.



Figure 6. meadow path-side, and Salpa Line tank obstacles among a grazing-field

While the mushrooms and berries were eaten almost immediately or the next day, the dried bunches of plants were kept and taken home to Helsinki. Later that month, while visiting Latvia, I found Silverweed cinquefoil, to add to my collection of the 'hoary' kind. Almost 4 months later, I still hold the bags of Cinquefoil and St. Johns Wort, to be used for a future occasion within the year of picking. With a plan to write much this year ahead, I am sure I there will be an appropriate time.

To achieve their encouraging effect, Henriette Kress advises to self-prescribe a small portion of Cinquefoil per day (eaten or added to herbal tea). The important and beneficial constituents of the wild herb are tannins (up to 25%), glycosides, bitters, and flavonoids. Beyond shielding one from external pressures, Kress notes that the components in Cinquefoils also relieve menstrual, gut cramps and mild diarrhea, as well as being a typical qualities of being an astringent, tightening swollen membranes, relieving inflammations locally, including blisters and sunburn.²¹ This information is also emphasized in the entry for *Potentilla anserina* in Plants for a Future database, a resource and information centre for edible and otherwise useful plants, initiated by Ken and Addy Fern in Cornwall, UK.²²

Kress's inspirational description of the usage or affect of Cinquefoils conjured for me in *Abandoned Mystery* project an imagination and a search for a 'herbological defence'. The connection is not totally random: Cinquefoil flower shapes have been used in heraldic and military contexts over history, especially in medieval France, symbolizing strength, power, honour and loyalty.²³



Figure 7. Dried Hoary cinquefoil (*Potentilla argentea*)

Could the knowledge and practice of collecting and using Cinquefoil be an appropriate way of remembering and absorbing the memory-heritage of Salpa Line, Finland's response to external invasion during World War II? As interpreters of bunker-trench landscape and history, I suggest that creative and practical-minded visitors to Salpa Line can personally embolden themselves against pressure, maybe soothe wounds, and develop new stories in new ways²⁴ While tangible heritage perspectives lead towards physical 'museumification' and reconstruction, intangible heritage perspectives could instead lead towards ritual performance, ingestion and renewal: Each year, we could go out and look for *Potentilla* in our landscape, and brew some tea (Figure 7).

- 1 Artist Placement Group. (1972). Statement of methodology, in *Structure in Events*.
- 2 This image was similar to the one which attracted our group on this expedition. As a Helsinki-based resident, and coordinator of the expedition, I admit that I also learned about this area first via a tourist's online travel blog eastwards from Helsinki to Viipuri, and used a Wikimedia Commons image of Salpa Line to promote the expedition.
- 3 Goss, A. (n.d.). Salpa Line. Retrieved from http://www.nortfort.ru/salpa/index_e.html
- 4 Abandoned Mystery. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.abandonedmystery.info>
- 5 Lokinpesä Cabin (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://lokinpesa.fi>
- 6 Pucena, S. & Paterson, A. (2010). Foraging in Central Kurzeme Expedition. Retrieved from <http://www.herbologies-foraging.net/activities/kurzeme-expedition-2010/>
- 7 Paterson, A. (2013). Mountain crowberries: Foraging and measuring knowledge or experience, In L. Beloff, E. Berger & T. Haapoja (eds.), *Field_Notes: Field and Laboratory as Sites for Art&Science Practices*, Helsinki: Finnish Bioart Society (Forthcoming).
- 8 Kress, H. (2011). *Practical Herbs*. Tampere: Yrtit ja yrttiterapia Henriette Kress (1st edition). p. 55-58.
- 9 *Ketohanhikki* in Finnish, *Gåsört* in Swedish, *Ланчатка гусиная* in Russian.
- 10 *Hopeahanhikki* in Finnish, *Silverfingerört* or *Femfingerört* in Swedish, *Ланчатка серебристая* in Russian.
- 11 Potentilla. (n.d.). Retrieved January 15, 2013, from Wikimedia Commons: <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Potentilla>
- 12 University of Helsinki Natural Science Museum. (2011). Kasviatlas: Potentilla anserina. Retrieved from <http://www.luomus.fi/kasviatlas/maps.php?taxon=41802&size=0&year=0> | Kasviatlas: Potentilla argentea. Retrieved from <http://www.luomus.fi/kasviatlas/maps.php?taxon=41814&size=0&year=0>
- 13 Salpa Centre. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://salpakeskus.fi>
- 14 *Mustikka* in Finnish, *Blåbär* in Swedish, and *Черника* in Russian.
- 15 *Puolukka* in Finnish, *Lingon* in Swedish, and *Брусника* in Russian.
- 16 Arctic Flavours/Arkiset aromit. (n.d.). Nutritional Value of Berries. Retrieved January 14, 2013, from <http://www.arctic-flavours.fi/en/info/berries/nutritional+value+of+berries/figures/>
- 17 *Mäkikuisma* in Finnish, *Johannesknopp* in Swedish, and *Зверобой продырявленный* in Russian.
- 18 Plants for a Future. (n.d.). Hypericum perforatum. Retrieved January 15, 2013, from <http://www.pfaf.org/user/Plant.aspx?LatinName=Hypericum+perforatum>
- 19 Kress, H. (2012, May 5). Herb of the week: St. John's wort. Retrieved from <http://www.henriettesherbal.com/blog/hotw-sjw.html>
- 20 Salpa Trail. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.salpakeskus.fi/index.php?l=3&path=15,295.0>
- 21 Kress, H. (2011). *Ibid*. Related material retrieved from <http://www.henriettesherbal.com/blog/hotw-cinquefoil.html>
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